

Hachi and the Serpent

by Bainbridge Martenson

There were, of course, no strict protocols or time-worn traditions on the subject, but as the eighth son of the family, only the best was expected of Hachitarou (or Hachi, as everyone had taken to calling him). One could deduce the origins of the superstition quickly: eight limbs, eight eyes; surely, eight must be a lucky number. Logically, a lucky son to the people of the Mittsuyama jungle would be one that could hunt as naturally as one would breathe, given how much import was placed on it both culturally and practically- but to be frank, Hachi had never felt particularly strongly about the hunt. His elders would spend hours beyond measure trying desperately to impress upon him the weight of it, and the history that it held for his people, but it never really stuck. Kōjin, the Serpent of the Wood, patron deity of Mittsuyama, had made Hachi's kin in the image of his mother, and taught them to hunt- now, they held a festival in his honor at the end of each summer, and the village's boys would be sent out to catch game for the feast, as a final trial before adulthood. As far as he was concerned, it was just a story they were playing their part in preserving. Every year, he would watch the older boys gather at the forest god's bonfire, venture into the wilds, and return with a haul of meat and greens that the village would feast on during the festival- and it wasn't that he didn't get it, but it just didn't strike him. As he grew older, one of his brothers in particular caught his attention; Roku, the sixth son. It was only ever brief, but he would return on occasion with trinkets and tales from abroad- this was what interested Hachi. His elder brother was a hunter of a different type, tracking law breakers and mad men across the world for the promise of coin, and every time he returned, it seemed that he had encountered something even stranger than his last adventure. That was what Hachi wanted. Adventure! To leave the oppressive heat and darkness of the jungle and see what bizarre things the world had to offer! Even the Firebreathers that sought the guidance of the forest god spoke of the outside: that there were gods besides the one that stalked the

jungle, and lands far beyond the bounds of the Empire (which he had never properly set foot in, beyond the ancestral homelands of his kin). There was so much to see, and he had seen none of it.

He had decided that he would not stay. Hachi would free himself of the chains that had bound him since his birth, and explore the world. That said, it was all well and good to think these things, but it wasn't something he could just up and do. Roku, after all, was not an eighth son; the idea of Hachi simply disappearing, or heavens forbid, refusing outright to participate in the traditional lifestyle of his people would mean the respect his family had spent generations building would vanish along with him. This would require a plan, something considered, and carefully, at that. If he could not simply leave, then he would have to convince them- his family, his village, and the elders. They would never listen to reason (or, rather, they would never listen to his reasons), so it would have to be something else. He would have to prove to them, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that he was both ready for the outside world, and that there was nothing more he could offer to the village.

The idea came to him in time, though he truly wished that it hadn't. The initiation ceremony was to be held soon, and it was finally his time to participate; all of the boys of the village would be sent out in the morning to the wilderness, and when they returned in the evening, their quarry would feed the attendants at the festival to honor the forest god. They would be acknowledged as men, and as hunters. This was his only chance to break free: if he could bring home something big and dangerous enough, the elders would have to respect his wishes. But big and dangerous would not be enough, he came to realize. It had to be the biggest. The most dangerous.

When the time came, and he was called to stand before the elders, the village held their breath. They had great expectations of him, even though he had never actually done anything particularly remarkable.

"And Hachitarou," the elder began, silencing the hushed whispers of the crowd, "what will you bring us?"

Hachi felt like his belly was full of lead, and his head was full of air. It was his last chance, and he knew it; he could answer with something simple,

that anyone could catch, and be done with it. He could've...

... but his mouth moved anyway. "I will bring you Kōjin." he replied, firmly.

The crowd around them began to murmur again, gradually rising as the elder considered the young man. After a few moments, the elder raised his hand, silencing the assemblage once more. "You will hunt the god of the forest?" he asked, his tone flat.

"Yes, elder." Hachi said, mechanically. He felt as though he was watching all of this play out from a little box inside his own head, powerless to stop it.

The old man pondered some more before nodding solemnly. "Very well." Turning to face the crowd, the elder announced simply, "Hachitarou hunts Kōjin!"

It was met with overpowering silence.

Hachi sat stiffly in his nook, pedipalps rubbing anxiously against one another. He had been waiting for a while, and imagined he might be for a while yet; his quarry liked to patrol its territory thoroughly before settling in for the night, and the evening was only just waning. The humid air of the jungle peeled the carefully trained layers from his spirit, leaving him with nothing but himself, his fear, and the heat. The little hunter saw eyes in every shadow, and flicked every one of his own eyes toward the source of any noise, dreading that he had already given himself away to his game, and that he would never make it back to the ceremony awaiting his arrival in the village. He wanted to strangle the fool he had been only hours ago, claiming he would bring back such a trophy for the feast- even if it was his only real option.

He had prepared for this day thoroughly, but even going over his preparations in his mind for the eighth time, Hachi knew deep down that it wouldn't be enough. He had beseeched the village's wind speaker for all of the gritty details of where he would find the forest god at the time of the hunt, though that goes without saying. His true preparations had begun with the Firebreathers, learning their techniques as best he could with the

time he had before the ceremony; he had strung the god's clearing with half a dozen traps which were capable of immobilizing anything he'd seen them used on; and as a last resort, he brought the thing that Roku had given him on his last visit. His brother told him that it was a weapon of some kind, and a stranger one he had never encountered: the thing was all sleek metal, with a lever on the back that would go click-clack if you fiddled with it, and a thin silver semi-circle in the middle that would go tick-tick if you pulled on it. The little compartment in the center of it slid out if you moved the latch, and it had six little divots in it- that's where the little extra pieces went, which Roku gave him six of. His brother had told him that if he was ever cornered by something and didn't think he could weasel out of it, he could point it at whatever was after him and pull on the part that went tick-tick, and that would be that. Hachi nervously gripped the handle of the metal thing- he had never known Roku to lie, but he did not want this to be the place or the way that he found out.

The world slowed down. A crunch sounded from the opposite side of the clearing. All of Hachi's eyes stared straight ahead.

This time, he knew he wasn't imagining them: two red eyes peeked from the shadows at the far end. They were big, wide. They slunk forwards, the low light of the empty space dancing across the unnatural face they were attached to. Under those bloody red jewels lay a long, jagged jaw, that threatened to split its head in half. Above, needle-sharp spines that traveled back down its scalp and neck, until they receded into the shadows. The rest of it was in the clearing all at once; a long, slick body, like a snake's, crowned on either end by a pair of limbs thicker than tree trunks, spines stretching from the base of his neck down like a mountain range, and a tail that was long and thick enough that it dragged loudly on the ground.

This was it. It was him.

Kōjin, the Serpent of the Wood.

Even in spite of his training, Hachi's breath hitched in his throat. Until now, he had never seen Kōjin in person. Until now, he wasn't even sure it was real. There was a measure of terror in him, without a doubt, but he was surprised to discover that that was not the emotion that overwhelmed him in the moment- it was joy. This was the single most breathtaking thing he

had seen in his life. A real live god, in the flesh! He could scarcely believe it! Hachi basked in this feeling of discovery, but could only maintain it for a moment before the realization brought him crashing back down to solid ground: he was hunting that god. That god, that could rip him in half without a thought. That god, that could chew a hole through him like fire through paper. That god, that could tear his head off with a flick of its tail. The heat sunk into Hachi's soul as he watched the divine beast curl up in the center of the clearing. He was hunting that god.

What happened next was a haze. Hachi felt as though he was in a fugue, body moving without his direction, instinct and practice being the only thing keeping him alive. He lit the circle of alcohol-sodden brush around the clearing, diving through and plunging his hunting knife towards the god's forehead. He felt the rush of air and a stinging in his chest, and when he realized what was happening, he was backed against the steadily growing wall of fire with the great beast stalking towards him, each step shaking the blazing trees overhead. Something in his hind-brain predicted a swipe, and he leapt preemptively, only narrowly avoiding it. Hachi half-sprinted, half-crawled to the far end of the arena, trying desperately to angle himself to where the god would have to go through his traps to get to him. His heart sank as Kōjin strode forwards crushing or dismantling each one without so much as a thought. He could go no further. The heat of the boundary he created gnawed at his back. Hachi shakily reached down, fetching the metal thing from its leather half-pouch. He held it at the angry god, trembling violently. There was nothing he could do now.

Even so, he thought of his brother, prayed silently, and squeezed.

A sound like the clap of thunder filled the clearing and his vision went white. Hachi thought for a moment that, in the aftermath, he had gone deaf and blind- perhaps even, the weapon had backfired catastrophically, killing him before the god he had foolishly antagonized had the chance. As his vision steadily cleared, he found that neither were true. Hachi stood before the god still, locked in position, fearing that Kōjin might pounce if he moved so

much as a muscle. He hadn't even noticed the fires had all gone out.

The god did not lunge for him. Instead, it sat itself gently on the beaten-down grass of the clearing, staring its great, glassy, red eyes at Hachi.

Faced with such placidity, Hachi could do nothing but collapse to his knees. He had given everything he had to the god, and it hadn't even granted him the dignity of a flesh wound. Unconsciously, he brought a hand up to the stinging he felt on his chest earlier, finding (with some alarm) a deep, four-pronged gash carved into his chitinous chest plate. He made a sound that was somewhere between a chuckle and a sob, hunching over and dropping onto his hands.

He would've spent the rest of his life there, staring at the lightly charred grass, contemplating his mistakes, had Hachi not felt the divine beast nudge its short snout against him. He managed to glance up. Kōjin looked down at him, head tilted curiously.

"I promised the elder I would bring you back for the festival." Hachi heaved. He wasn't entirely sure why he bothered- could the god even understand him? If it did, would it care? He had boasted to his village that he would do the impossible, and he had been humbled, unsurprisingly. The god would have good reason to leave him to his fate, or worse still, deliver judgment himself.

Yet, Kōjin became more insistent, nearly lifting Hachi entirely back to his feet with his snout. The young hunter found himself back in the world of the living. He stood, eye to eye with the god he had failed to kill, and the two regarded each other. Then, without a word (if the beast even had any to spare), Kōjin strode up to Hachi, and lowered himself.

There was nothing left in Hachi to question anything, then. In a fluid motion, he swung himself up on top of the god, settling in as it rose back up and began to stride into the green.

By the time the crunching of branches and leaves began at the outskirts of the village, the moon had almost reached its apex. All the boys sat around a dead bonfire, and the elders stood in solemn silence. Every eye in the as-

semblage turned towards the noise when it began. Hachi returned last.

As the god and its rider breached the treeline, a wordless cry went up through the crowd, and a mother ran to her son. Hachi regarded her as though from the top of the world, her relief and worry falling on deaf ears. He felt like he was a million miles away. A thought flitted through his mind- maybe sometime soon, he would be.

Kōjin stalked up to the bonfire, from which the boys had cleared away quickly. He lingered for but a moment before his jaw split wide with a bone-rattling crack, and a gout of black flame spilled from it, reinvigorating the embers of the dead fire.

At some point, Hachi slid off the beast's back, and into the grasp of the crowd, surrounded by murmurs of awe and concern. With a confidence he did not know he had in him, fueled by an exhaustion that soaked through every part of him, he moved to stand before the elder that he had just this morning. The boy- the man, now- stood silent for a long while, thinking carefully about what he would say. Maybe now he could explain his feelings? The longing for adventure? The feeling of entrapment? He glanced around, awash in a sea of whispers and probing eyes. Finally, Hachi looked to Kōjin. The god had wrapped itself around the revived bonfire, basking in the warmth. He considered this sight for a long while.

Turning back to the elder, he said simply, "I leave tomorrow in search of greater prey."